Overview

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Canada and la Francophonie

Canada

La Francophonie

Despite the many differences between them, la Francophonie is best understood by drawing a parallel with the much better-known Commonwealth. As is particularly well-known in Canada, the Commonwealth is a unique voluntary association linking 48 independent nations across the globe, bringing together developed and developing countries, old states and new, tiny island nations and continental land-masses, representing a total of one billion people.

The centrepiece of the Commonwealth is the biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), a club characterized by friendly informality that has provided moral and practical leadership on many of the major issues of the day, including South Africa, international economic order, and development questions. The most recent CHOGM took place in Vancouver in October 1987.

Canada has always been one of the Commonwealth's strongest supporters and considers it a model of multilateralism at work. The Commonwealth cuts across traditional regional and interest blocs, which makes it an ideal instrument to expand North-South dialogue and broaden international understanding and consensus. The Commonwealth enables Canada to deepen its bilateral relations with 47 countries and to reinforce its foreign policy aims as a whole.

Many of these same functions are also a part of la Francophonie, but Canada's approach to their implementation often takes a very different form.

For a long time, la Francophonie has been perceived exclusively from a linguistic point of view. Even today it escapes a ready-made definition and a precise geographic delimitation.

La Francophonie is, first of all, a community of individuals and peoples using the French language to varying degrees, and it has to be

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appreciated that this community existed long before any attempt to unify its diverse components under a single banner was made.

Many leaders of this community saw the potential usefulness of such a community for engineering common activities aimed at fostering the social and cultural development and economic growth of its individual members. This explains the emergence of both private (over 200) and governmental institutions involved in the pursuit of dialogue and co-operation between Francophones from countries all over the world.

The nature of la Francophonie has also been influenced by the quest of leaders of Francophone countries for an organizational framework for its member states.

As its heritage is more cultural than political in nature, la Francophonie is essentially a matter of values permeating a culture or of a language as a unifying force. French is not only the communication medium of la Francophonie, but its catalyst. La Francophonie is now a community of countries that base the pursuit of common objectives on the use of a common language.

These definitions highlight a complex reality. There are over 40 countries that use the French language on a regular basis both domestically and in the international arena. Most of these are members of the Paris-based Agency for Cultural and Technical Co-operation, which was founded in 1970 and includes Quebec and New Brunswick as "participating governments." Its purpose is to foster mutual co-operation in the fields of culture, education, science and technology. Altogether, the member countries account for 250 million people, from Europe, Africa, the Americas and Oceania. In other words, its members come from the North, South, East and West and represent different political systems, different lifestyles, different standards of living and different values.

From la Francophonie to the Francophone Summit

The political leaders who emerged from decolonization in French Africa in the 1960s wanted to expand institutional and functional co-operation within the Francophone world. With their newly acquired freedom, independence and equality, they wished to create new mechanisms of consultation, co-operation, and, whenever deemed appropriate, policy co-ordination at the political level. Such ideas were fostered by men like Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Hamani Diori of Niger, and Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia.

As with the Commonwealth's leaders, consultations among political leaders of la Francophonie progressively covered all areas of endeavours and activities, whether political, economic, social, technical or cultural. What emerged in the process was a political solidarity at the highest level which demanded both the type of formalization best suited to heads of state or government and the structure to energize this co-operation on a systematic basis: a summit.

Many Francophone heads of state agreed with the idea, but several different concepts of the summit emerged in the 1970s.

Several African countries saw it as a way to expand their access to sources of development assistance, a mini-North-South dialogue. France envisaged the summit as some form of an enlarged Agency for Cultural and Technical Co-operation at the level of heads of government to talk language and culture.

Quebec's goal at the time was to use the Francophone Summit to foster its quest for international recognition and status while participating in the major cultural and other common endeavours of Francophone countries. Quebec wanted a summit to focus on issues within its constitutional prerogatives in the fields of language and culture.

As far as Canada was concerned, the federal government had always been convinced that regular multilateral consultations at the highest level would ensure that all its individual endeavours in la Francophonie would benefit from a common political will. To Canadians, a cultural summit would not meet the challenge and in many cases the existing Agency already covered the waterfront. Canada agreed that a summit which would focus only on North-South issues would duplicate efforts carried out elsewhere, while fueling undue expectations that could never be met entirely. Its approach was comprehensive and global: Canada wanted a summit that would have a strong political dimension and a macro-economic component in addition to an examination of cultural co-operation and development issues. In the end, this was the formula agreed to for the Paris Summit.

Prime Minister Mulroney led the Canadian delegation as a whole. The provincial premiers acted as "interested observers" in the discussions on political and economic issues and as "active participants" in the discussions on cultural co-operation in general and on development.

The role of President Mitterrand in the launching of the first summit was critical. He

shared with Canada and his African colleagues a broad view of what the summit should be.

From Paris to Quebec

The Paris Summit of February 1986 was a historical event. It had been fraught with risks of failure. For Canada, it turned out to be a great moment for federal-provincial co-operation in the international arena. It showed that one could give Quebec its legitimate place in la Francophonie without tampering with federal primacy in international relations.

The Paris meeting also allowed the Canadian concept of political consultation "à la Commonwealth" to prevail, notably on South Africa. Similarly, an important resolution on the financial situation and food needs in Africa was sponsored by Canada and reflected the macro-economic perspective it thought this new international institution should provide.

On specifics, the Canadian-sponsored immunization program was extended to Francophone countries, and a program of scholarship was created. A technical training and assistance program in the field of energy was announced, and important measures were taken in telecommunications to widen the scope for Francophone expression. These areas are clearly those of particular Canadian expertise.

In Quebec City, the nature and intensity of the discussions of the political issues on the agenda clearly demonstrated how "real" this new multilateral institution was becoming. A healthy debate was carried out on the situation in the Middle East, and considerable moral support was provided by the summit to the struggle against *apartheid*. Furthermore, as a unique humanitarian gesture, the summit approved the creation of a scholarship program for the victims of *apartheid*. The Francophone Summit clearly established itself as a key actor in the formulation of policies towards South Africa. Its findings would contribute to a considerable extent to the decisions taken a month later at the CHOGM in Vancouver.

On the macro-economic side, considerable emphasis was given to assistance to debt-ridden countries in Africa. Canada erased the official development assistance debt of French-speaking countries south of the Sahara, a measure which foreshadowed a similar decision in Vancouver for Commonwealth countries in Africa. Altogether, 13 Sub-Saharan African countries benefited from this attempt to ease their debt burden. One of the most forward-looking resolutions to date on economic co-operation was adopted by the summit participants, and new co-operative ventures were examined which would lead to greater co-ordination among donor countries of la Francophonie. Again, the work carried out in Quebec City paved the way for the Vancouver Declaration on World Trade adopted by the Commonwealth.

In Quebec City, initiatives that were launched in Paris in February 1986 were confirmed or expanded, such as the Canadian-sponsored immunization program. On the "co-operation" side of the agenda, under the able direction of Premier Bourassa of Quebec, five major sectors of common endeavour were examined and practical work was done in the fields of culture and communications, agriculture, language industries, energy, and scientific information and technical development.

The Quebec Summit, inasmuch as it was the litmus test for the future of co-operation among Francophone countries, was a remarkable success. The Declaration of Solidarity adopted at Quebec not only set the long-term objectives of la Francophonie but reaffirmed as well its fundamental principles. La Francophonie now has a structure, a purpose and a framework. All this bodes well for the next summit in Dakar, Senegal.

Canada and la Francophonie: Benefits for Canada

Canada's involvement in la Francophonie aims at ensuring the flourishing of the French fact at home and abroad.

First, in Canada, for the seven million French-speaking Canadians who reside in Quebec, New Brunswick, Ontario and Manitoba, participation in la Francophonie adds an element of stability and harmony to the country.

Each member of la Francophonie contributes in some way to the development of the organization. Canada has been fostering research in linguistics to meet the specific requirements stemming from its bilingual nature. Canadians have developed sophisticated linguistic tools — data banks, French language software, automated translation, and language training among them — coupled with the high-technology communications systems needed to serve a population that stretches across a whole continent. This expertise is shared with, or exported to, other Francophone countries or institutions.

Canada's Francophone policies also aim at fostering the flourishing of French in the world as an extension, in the international arena, of its own domestic reality.

More specifically, Canada seeks to promote a free and open dialogue among very different, yet equal, partners in order to establish direct

exchanges beyond geographical, ideological, ethnic, religious, cultural and economic frontiers or barriers.

The federal government of Canada and the provincial governments of Quebec, New Brunswick, Ontario and Manitoba all play an active role within la Francophonie. The same applies to non-governmental Francophone institutions.

But for Canada, the positive impact of its belonging to la Francophonie goes beyond the Francophone population and benefits all Canadians. It is not just a matter of cultural enrichment. All Canadians are likely to gain from their country's expanded participation in social, technological and economic development in the Francophone world.

Canada benefits from expanded bilateral relations with the summit participants, particularly France, with whom it has moved on this issue from a painful diplomatic impasse to full-fledged co-operation. This is yet another council in which it participates with one of its key European allies.

A new international forum has emerged which may assist in energizing the international system. This is one of Canada's contributions to the enhancement of multilateralism in international relations — one of its key foreign policy objectives.

Adapted from an article by Ferry de Kerckhove, Director, Economic and Trade Analysis Division, Department of External Affairs, published in Liaison, *a publication of the Foreign Service Community Association.*

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